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Tears and prayers mark the memory of 230,000 killed on 5th anniversary of Asian tsunami

Tears, prayers mark Asian tsunami anniversary

By DAVID LONGSTREATH | ASSOCIATED PRESS | Dec 26, 09 7:38 AM CST in [World](#)

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Buddhist monks chanted on white-sand beaches in Thailand and thousands prayed at mosques in Indonesia to mark the fifth anniversary of the Asian tsunami that left 230,000 people dead.

[Article continues below](#)



(1 of 11) [« Prev](#) | [Next »](#) [Slideshow](#)

A young girl runs past umbrellas printed with portraits of smiling children made for a project to raise support for children in the province worst-hit by Indian ocean tsunami in Banda Aceh, Aceh province, Indonesia. (Associated Press)

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The devastating Dec. 26, 2004, tsunami struck a dozen countries around the Indian Ocean rim. Its towering waves wiped out entire coastal communities, devastated families and crashed over tourist-filled beaches the morning after Christmas. Survivors waded through a horror show of corpse-filled waters.

In Thailand, hundreds of residents and foreigners returned to the beaches on the island of Phuket to recall one of the worst natural disasters of modern times.

A moment of silence was observed on Phuket's Patong Beach, a popular strip of hotels and restaurants, to mark the moment the tsunami struck.

Buddhist monks in bright orange robes chanted prayers. Onlookers wept and embraced.

Giorgio Capriccioli, an Italian who lives on Phuket, carried a bouquet of white flowers into the ocean.

He waded knee-deep in water that five years ago was clogged with corpses and cast the flowers adrift to honor the memory of two friends. His wife owns several beach-front shops but decided not to go to work the morning the tsunami struck.

"My wife would be dead if it weren't for the fact that she were pregnant and didn't go to work that day," he said at a ceremony that also attracted suntanned tourists in skimpy swimsuits, as well as Thai villagers.

The ceremonies on Phuket were to culminate in the evening with candle-lighting ceremonies and the release of hundreds of light-filled lanterns into the sky.

Thousands of survivors in Indonesia's Aceh province, which was hardest-hit, held prayer services at mosques and beside the mass graves where tens of thousands were buried. Indonesia's loss of about 167,000 accounted for more than half the total death toll.

The tsunami was sparked by a 9.2-magnitude underwater earthquake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra _ the mightiest earthquake in 40 years.

In Aceh, on the island of Sumatra, the quake toppled homes and buildings and sent panicked communities rushing into the streets. About 20 minutes later, a wall of water up to six stories high surged in from the sea. Traveling at jetliner speed, the wave carried with it toppled trees, crumpled cars and refrigerators. It sent people scrambling up the sides of buildings and in search of higher ground.

On Saturday's anniversary, Indonesian villagers briefly panicked when another strong earthquake struck deep under the sea off the eastern coast, officials said. Residents in Saumlaki, about 1,680 miles (2,700 kilometers) east of the capital Jakarta, said the magnitude 6.0 quake caused an electricity blackout, but there were no reports of damage or injuries.

Indonesia sits above a series of fault lines that make the vast island nation one of the most earthquake-prone places in the world. This year, another earthquake measuring magnitude 7.6 struck off West Sumatra on Sept. 30, killing hundreds of people and toppling hundreds of homes and buildings.

After the 2004 tsunami, more than \$13 billion in aid money poured in from around the world, nearly half for Aceh, where bridges, homes and full city blocks of cement buildings had collapsed. In some communities of the devout Muslim province only the mosque was left standing.

A huge reconstruction effort has rebuilt Aceh, providing more than 140,000 new homes, 2,227 miles (3,585 kilometers) of roads, 1,500 schools and 1,047 hospitals.

"After five years ... the people of Aceh have risen and have a new life," Indonesia's Vice President Boediono told a crowd gathered near Ulee Lheue port in Aceh. Like many Indonesians he uses only a single name.

"Their struggle to rise from tsunami tragedy has inspired the people in this country, and around the region," said Boediono.

Traffic across Sri Lanka came to a standstill Saturday as people around the country observed two minutes of silence for the 35,000 people who died there. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake presided over a ceremony in northwestern Kurunegala that was broadcast on live television.

Associated Press writers Jocelyn Gecker in Bangkok, Fakhrurradzie Gade in Banda Aceh, Indonesia; Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia and Bharatha Mallawarachi in Colombo, Sri Lanka contributed to this report.